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NSC FOR MARCHESE/SINGH/ABRAMS

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TAGS: PREL FR LE PGOV

SUBJECT: JOHNNY ABDO TELLS THE LAF NOT TO PLAY INTO SYRIA'S HANDS

REF: PARIS 1307

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

**¶1. (C) Summary:** On May 29, former Lebanese Military Intelligence Chief Johnny Abdo said he recently advised LAF Commander Michel Suleiman not to play into Syria's hands in resolving the crisis in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. Abdo said Syria's strategy was to goad the LAF into a pitched battle with the Palestinians. Consequently, he advised Suleiman instead to limit the LAF to a supporting role while letting friendly Palestinian forces take down Fatah al-Islam's militants. Abdo despaired of the Christian community's ability to rally behind a presidential candidate other than Michel Aoun, said he was advising Saad Hariri not to become Prime Minister, and indicated he would not be surprised if the Sarkozy government were to intensify its contacts with Syria. End summary.

Beating Syria at its Own Game

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**¶2. (C)** Johnny Abdo, who served as Lebanon's Chief of Military Intelligence during the Lebanese civil war, told us May 29 that he called LAF Commander Michel Suleiman (with whom he rarely speaks) on or about May 25 to offer advice on handling the crisis in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. Abdo said he was fully convinced that Fatah al-Islam was a Syrian surrogate, and that Syria's aim in nurturing Palestinian extremist groups was to goad the LAF into a pitched battle. Such a battle would demonstrate that the Palestinians (not Hizballah) were the source of Lebanon's instability, and would likely spill over into the other refugee camps and quickly overwhelm the LAF's military capabilities and political cohesion -- thus setting the stage for a return of Syrian control.

**¶3. (C)** Abdo told Suleiman that he must not fall into the trap Damascus had set for the LAF. Rather than committing the army to a frontal assault on Nahr al-Bared, Suleiman should resolve the stand-off through an "intelligence operation" in which 300 or so friendly Palestinian fighters would slip into the camp and neutralize the Fatah al-Islam militants. The LAF would play a supporting role as needed.

**¶4. (C)** Abdo said he subsequently spoke to Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who told him that Suleiman had greatly appreciated Abdo's advice. Nevertheless, Abdo told us he remained worried about the potential for disaster, not least if the GOL becomes paralyzed by indecision. He criticized the GOL for saying that it would take a cabinet decision to authorize the LAF to enter the camp. "They should have declared it a

military zone and authorized the army to take all necessary action," said Abdo, adding that time is not on the army's side. "The army is less confessional than other institutions in Lebanon, but it is still confessional. Any military operation that lasts longer than three days will start to rip the army apart (along confessional lines)," Abdo observed darkly. Abdo singled out current military intelligence chief George Khoury as an impediment to a successful resolution of the crisis, saying that Khoury remained loyal to Damascus. Finally, Abdo noted wryly that Michel Suleiman was not entirely pleased that the U.S. had been so forthcoming in meeting the LAF's ammunition needs (including those of Lebanon's Gazelle helicopters), inasmuch as the rapid resupply effort had deprived Suleiman of an excuse for inactivity.

March 14's Image Problem

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¶5. (C) Turning to the political fortunes of the March 14 majority (which he supports), Abdo said he remained convinced (reftel) that March 14 is slowly surrendering to the Syrian-backed opposition. "If anything, it has gotten worse" said Abdo, who decried the Christian community's inability to produce, and rally behind, an alternative to Michel Aoun in the upcoming presidential election. Abdo skewered several potential contenders, saying Samir Geagea failed to convince anyone that he had turned over a new leaf, whereas Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh probably could not be elected without a constitutional amendment (for which there was no political appetite, given the unfortunate precedent with Lahoud).

¶6. (C) The underlying problem, according to Abdo, is that

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most Lebanese equate March 14 with Saad Hariri and the Sunni community. Consequently, any candidate backed by March 14 will be seen as a Sunni stooge. In an effort to give March 14 a face-lift, Abdo said he had repeatedly urged Saad to name a Christian as the movement's secretary-general, but to no avail. Admitting that his influence on Saad was limited (Saad similarly brushed off Abdo's advice that he not try to become prime minister, and may have been annoyed when Abdo advised him not to launch a Sunni political party), Abdo contrasted the young Hariri to his late father: "Rafik had a gift -- when he spoke to you, he always made you feel needed.

With Saad, when you look him in the eyes you get the feeling that he's thinking to himself: 'I talk to Chirac, Putin, etc., so why do I need you?'"

French-Syrian Relations

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¶7. (C) With regard to the future of French-Syrian relations under President Sarkozy's new government, Abdo said he would not be surprised to see stronger ties between Paris and Damascus. He noted that during the final months of the Chirac presidency, Syrian military intelligence chief Assef Shawqat made multiple trips to Paris. When Abdo tipped off Nazek Hariri to one of Shawqat's visits, Nazek raised it with Chirac, who was "stunned and furious" to discover that Shawqat was in Paris at the invitation of French intelligence. "Chirac had no idea what they (his intelligence services) were doing . . . one of my contacts in French intelligence told me that France had interests that were more important than Chirac's friendship with the Hariris. But I think Sarkozy, who was Minister of the Interior at the time, knew exactly what was going on," said Abdo. In addition, Abdo claimed that French intelligence passed a message in 2006 to Lebanese President Emile Lahoud telling him that it was ok to criticize Chirac, but not France; Lahoud's assumption, Abdo added, was that the message originated with Sarkozy.

¶8. (C) Comment: Abdo's web of contacts and his close

connection to Nazek Hariri provides him with an intriguing, if necessarily remote, perspective on Lebanese events. As always, we defer to Embassy Beirut as to the accuracy of his analysis.

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